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The Book Tree Press – an accidental imprint

Lucy Roscoe

When I began working professionally 10 years ago I was a confused illustration graduate with an interest in drawing and printmaking, but also bookbinding and using paper sculpturally. I was struggling to reconcile how these elements worked together and how all this creativity might become a career. With a two year MFA stretched out before me it seemed appropriate to use this time to explore, creating a series of playful, sculptural book works, exploring storytelling, materials and process. Setting aside the idea of a client for a while I was able to think about a relationship between the maker and audience, and how these weird and wonderful artifacts might be *published* or sent out into the world. This research project became the imaginary imprint *The Book Tree Press*.

To my surprise 10 years later the imprint is still here, and very much a real thing. The playful experiments have become a practice in their own right, however also inform the commissioned illustration work I undertake. Significantly they have also influenced my undergraduate teaching practice, projects offering opportunities for students to learn such skills as pacing, structure and the conversation with an audience. As I pause to reflect on 10 years of practice and some of the projects undertaken, I also want to consider what next for this accidental imprint.

The manifesto

The original research question I posed explored the sculptural and three-dimensional possibilities of a book and considered how these unusual books might be published when they did not take recognisable forms. As a maker who is keen to do everything all at once I am easily distracted and it was helpful to have manifesto which directed my energies in the early days. It was an opportunity to explore what differentiated me from other makers. As a new graduate I took part in business training and as business mentors explained, this was also my unique selling point.

The books produced in the early days of the imprint were made using a range of contemporary and traditional printmaking processes and produced in small editions. They continue to be made in this way. In the tradition of artists' books the materials, form and even the binding of the book itself are all integral to the narrative. In this way the work dances between illustration, design, art and craft and the *process* of design and creation is as important as the final book. This was an important discovery.

The name of the imprint alludes to the organic nature of the book form, as well and the common description of book pages as *leaves*. It also honours the first sculptural book created for the imprint – a book tree (figure 1). In concentrating on making books sculptural, I enjoyed using traditional bindings, however being playful and manipulating them to suit my needs. In the example of the book tree, a long stitch binding was used, then the ends joined so the book was completely circular. I have since learned from experience that you can plan the whole book before you begin making, resulting in less need to manipulating bindings in order to solve problems of your own making!

Finding a tribe

As I looked for an identity as a maker, I found it helpful to test my books out in different markets. I quickly discovered a solid home at specialist artists' book fairs, gaining experience by taking part regularly in *Bookmarket* held at *The Fruitmarket Gallery*, and smaller fairs such as *By Leaves we live* held at the *Scottish Poetry Library* (figure 2). Taking part in events of this kind proved useful in testing out books on audiences, noticing who my audience was and allowing commissioners to find me. Any fair of this kind

encourages a sense of identity and belonging, welcoming participants into this Community of Practice¹. I spoke the correct language and had not need to explain the work. It just was.

I remain very interested in materials and process. Richard Sweeney reflects in his introduction to the book *Paper: Tear, fold, rip, crease, cut* on the beautiful simplicity of paper, which can be used in so many different ways:

Paper presents us with the opportunity to create seemingly limitless variations of form, structure and composition... there are few materials capable of presenting such a diversity of form-making through manipulation solely by hand... The prevalence of hand-craft in the creative world today is perhaps surprising given the dominance of digital technologies. I believe it is the sheer physicality – the ability to mould, shape and play with physical stuff – that makes paper manipulation a far more immediate and intuitive means to create object, visuals and works of art.’ (Sloman 2009:5)

In the books I make I am interested in the tactile relationship between the reader and the object, the way it feels, weight, the way that they choose to turn the pages. It was the role of paper and bookbinding in my work that established an ongoing relationship with *Craft Scotland*. I have shown work in their exhibitions and led a range of workshops with them. Workshops range from very quick and introductory bookbinding sessions and CPD workshops for teachers, to more reflective sessions with community groups.

In 2018 I ran an interesting set of workshops with the *Living Memory Association* based in Leith. We met each week in the surroundings of the *Little Shop of Memory*, a museum and archive of donated items (figure 3). The surroundings and stories shared provided the source for a book form made each week. They were short classes and often there was more chat than making, however both the participants and I came away with ideas for future projects and a pride in the books made. In exchange for practical skills they shared memories and stories and I came away feeling that I had taken part in a residency of sorts. In the example shown I used drawings made on location to inform a version of the shop itself in book form, taking the idea of packaging as its form (figure 4).

Working with collections

In teaching undergraduate Illustration at Edinburgh College of Art, I advise students to test out a range of projects in order to understand the kinds of work they wish to undertake. They should fill their portfolio with work which models the commissions they wish to be given. Reflecting back, in contrast my practice as a designer has been largely shaped by the commissions I have been presented with. It is true that doing a particular kind of work leads to more of that kind of work, however in my first few years of practice, simply saying yes to every project exposed me to some surprising directions.

In 2013 I was invited the development officer at the *John Gray Centre* in East Lothian to join them as a project artist for a period of six months. This extended period with the museum, library and archive was a fascinating opportunity to explore new subject matter and collaborate with the archivists and volunteers at the centre. I have always been interested in museums and libraries in particular, but this was my first experience of an archive. Archives are troublesome because precious materials must be kept safe, yet they have no purpose if they are never seen. The brief was broad, looking for ways to engage audiences with the various collections using my skills as an illustrator. The project resulted in a set of cartoons illuminating the comic and tragic entries in the *Haddington Criminal Register* during the 1890s. The images are particularly useful for use with school groups. At the end of the project an artists’ book came together, linking up observational drawings from around the county, with narratives found in the local history library. This project was extremely useful in highlighting the need for solid subject to drive my practice.

¹ ‘Community of practice’ refers to a teaching theory established by Etienne Wenger in 1998. Communities of practice share joint enterprise, relationships of mutual engagement and a shared repertoire of communal resources (Wenger 1998: 2). In this case the artists’ book ‘community’ held a familiar language and was a place I could learn from more experienced practitioners.

The residency was followed by a number of other similar projects working with museum and library collections and continuing relationship developed with the *National Library of Scotland* (NLS). In an interesting commission I was invited to design an interactive piece to go alongside an exhibition of pop-up books from the collection. In the work I made a direct reference to the *The International Circus* by Lothar Meggendorfer (1979) a major figure in the history of pop-up books. A fascination with paper manipulation, the theatre and sculptural properties of books means that pop-up books continue to fascinate and influence my work. The more recent example of this is an artist's book made for an exhibition curated by *Liverpool Book Art* marking 200 years since the publication of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (*Frankenstein 2019*). I was drawn to the carousal books in the NLS collection and their parallels to a theatre set. Using this form I was able to create a series of sets which held the action on the novel, showing both the variety of landscapes used within the book and build up drama (figure 5.)

Problem solving – a relationship with the world of illustration

Despite spending much of my time in the world of artists' books, my background in design continues to underpin each project and I work best when there is a problem to be solved. In some projects a client sees a way for the most unusual of my books to become the solution to their problem. Each year the *Scottish Book Trust* invites a maker to design and make the trophies for *The Bookbug Picture Book Prize* and the *Scottish Teenage Book Prize*. My interest in storytelling through the book form made this a good collaboration. Children and teenagers vote to determine the winners therefore the brief was to show them enjoying reading together. The results were entirely made from paper, with a solid base of ply – made from layered paper. The paper figures were pliable, reminding me of paper dress up dolls from my childhood, as I draped them across armchairs and reading nooks (figure 6).

In a further example, working playfully with the book form has informed my illustration practice in creating material for mail-outs, or self-promotion. When you send out a sample of your work, it needs to stand out and also say something about you. I am interested in materials and the tactile experience of opening a physical letter, therefore I want this to be an interesting experience for the receiver. Whether that person is able to commission you or not, an interesting relationship is established by investing in this process, making it more enjoyable for both parties.

Teaching

Teaching has been an equal part of my creative practice throughout the last 10 years, even if I did not always realise it at the time. I began with lots of workshops, regularly working with children at book festivals to design revolting recipe books, forests of book trees and booky sculptures of lighthouses and rockets. I still often begin a workshop with children by holding up some of my unusual books and asking if they have ever made a book like that. One of my favourite moments in my career so far was a visit to *Wigtown Book Festival*, where exhausted following a large and busy workshop in a church hall, a child ran up to me in the town square. She had gone straight home after the workshop to use the skills we had taught her to make another book and came over to show it to me.

I love making books because they are accessible. With basic materials and little equipment you can make exquisite artefacts. I have made books with all ages and all abilities and hope to continue (figure 7). When teaching undergraduate students I quote Sarah Bodman often in her definition of an artists' book:

Successful artists' books utilize the whole design and production process to reinforce the message of the subject matter. Shapes, folds, text patterns and materials can be used to nudge the viewer in the direction of the artist's message, producing a unified coherent statement from the outset' (Bodman, 2005:8).

Teaching students to think at this level of detail, taking nothing for granted and make everything earn its place in the book has proved useful in teaching illustrators. No image created works in isolation, it always influences and is influenced by the text and other imagery surrounding it. For illustrators designing a comic or a picture book it is essential that they learn to work within a book form as this is the intended

format. Using page turns to drive a narrative, composing a page and taking the reader on a journey through the book can all be used intelligently.

As I teach I also reflect on my own work. If I am asking a student to cram more story content into their illustration then I must ask the same of myself back in the studio. This reflection can be helpful, driving for better work, but also challenging as there is no tutor there to acknowledge when the work is complete. The events *Bookmarks* at Edinburgh College of Art grew out of the desire to welcome students into the community of practice I described above. In this project, book artist Jane Hyslop and I have set up an artists' book and zine fair to give students the opportunity to test out their work in safety before undertaking professional events. As the event has grown we have encouraged playful approaches to publishing, such as in the collaborative 'Bumperzine', made on the day of the event with contributions from all stallholders (figure 8).

Studio work

At times over the last 10 years it has been difficult to know where to focus energy and there has not always been much motivation. Regular exhibitions and fairs are useful in pushing you to make something new, although sometimes whole years have gone by without much personal work. This has been discouraging.

In 2018 I joined in with the *100 Days Project Scotland* (2018) for the first time. The challenge is simple, choose a creative activity and repeat it every day for 100 days. I wisely chose to do something useful, making an illustration a day which would get me back into making work and serve as an opportunity to inject some new work into my portfolio. I chose the broad theme of home, allowing me to explore imagery from my everyday and direct surroundings, literature and some more challenging editorial work. I made a few interesting discoveries along the way, firstly that 100 days is a long time! It is also a lot of work, with no room for perfectionism. When you make enough iterations of a subject, some of them are bound to be good. I also found it interesting that although I had chosen to make single images, when I came to prepare the work for the resulting exhibition, the images had collated themselves into books, emerging as a collection of artists' books. I made the discovery that when you make enough books, you begin to think in the book form without even realising it (figure 9).

Another recent discovery I have made is the world of zine making. I have never been cool enough to make comics, however zines allow a way into this space. My students are swept up in the world of zines which Todd and Watson helpfully explain are 'cheaply made printed forms of expression on any subject. They are like mini magazines or home made comic books' (Todd and Watson, 2006). I appreciate this form for its collaborative potential. Again perfectionism has no place here. The work is quick and playful. Or political and passionate. It is linked to the recent rise in popularity of the risograph, which I have also tested out. It is quick and fun, translating a different range of marks than I can access using screen printing. However there is a machine between you and the ink, you cannot paint into the screen or create a blend. Yet it is a really fast way to print a lot of work, which is interesting in itself.

Future proofing

Looking to the future I wish to challenge myself with more complex subject matter, I want to get angry as I encourage my students too. Which means I need to work out where that passion should be rooted. Reflecting back I can see that more recently my ideas come from observations of the everyday, such as the realities of being mum to a small child, juggling work, learning to garden and learning not to work all the time. The book *Tuesday night swimming* is about just that (figure 10). I have been teaching groups to make this kind of books for a few years, however always just blank forms, waiting for the right content. As I swam backwards and forwards, observing those around me week after week, the idea of using this choppy and broken up form seemed perfect, especially its ability to stretch out its limbs and reveal the full story, a concertina with a few more kinks and mis-directions.

I have learned that as a designer I work best when given subject matter to make sense of a respond to – as in the archive and collections work, therefore perhaps more residencies would be a good move in the future. It has also been interesting to revisit the manifesto of The Book Tree Book, reminding me to explore the sculptural properties of paper and the book form as well as the narrative content.

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